

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 62 | Number 2 (Spring 2003)

pps. 255-256

The Chicago & Alton Railroad: the Only Way

James Beranek

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2003 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Beranek, James. "The Chicago & Alton Railroad: the Only Way." *The Annals of Iowa* 62 (2003), 255-256.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10691>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Although Richardson has not examined all the evidence and may not have all the answers, she asks the right questions. Further, she answers them eloquently. In doing so, she adds a new dimension to our understanding of a perennial issue in the historiography of the Civil War era: the story of Reconstruction's demise. This book will provoke argument in a relatively moribund field, and provide a useful supplement to Eric Foner's classic, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (1988).

The Chicago & Alton Railroad: The Only Way, by Gene V. Glendinning. Railroads in America Series. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002. viii, 274 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth.

Reviewer James Beranek lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He is engaged in a study of railroad structures along Iowa's Rock Island line.

The Chicago & Alton Railroad was chartered in 1847 to connect Alton, Illinois, on the Mississippi River, with Springfield (Abraham Lincoln was an early stockholder, lawyer, and passenger). Gene V. Glendinning recounts the difficulties the railroad's backers had raising construction money, dealing with the Illinois legislature, and fending off corporate vultures. Despite these challenges, the road was completed to Springfield and extended to Chicago in 1854 and to East St. Louis in 1858.

This tumultuous phase in the line's history ended in receivership the following year. Thanks to the efforts of its longtime president, Timothy Blackstone, however, the road was rebuilt into one of the most prosperous and best-maintained railroads in the Midwest. It built west to Kansas City, and in the hotly competitive Chicago-St. Louis passenger market it was the majority carrier. Conservatively managed, the Alton Road turned profits even during the Panics of 1873 and 1893.

Glendinning argues that this conservatism was both the Alton's strength and its fatal weakness; its focus on serving its local territory led it to pass up opportunities to expand further or to merge with a larger railroad. Dissatisfied stockholders removed Blackstone in 1899, launching the Alton on a 50-year odyssey of increasing debt, declining profits, and multiple owners. Finally, after a third receivership, the Chicago & Alton merged with the Gulf, Mobile & Ohio in 1947, ending its corporate existence.

The Chicago & Alton Railroad contains everything you would want to know about its namesake. Always in control of his material, Glendinning covers not only financial, political, and construction history but also the nitty-gritty of equipment, structures, and operations, all

placed in the context of state and national events. Despite some typos and photo reproduction that too often tends toward the blurred and muddy, this is a fine history for anyone interested in midwestern railroading.

An American Cycling Odyssey, 1887, by Kevin J. Hayes. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. xiv, 200 pp. Map, bibliographical essay, index. \$27.95 cloth.

Reviewer James Whiteside is associate professor of history at the University of Colorado at Denver. He is the author of "It Was a Terror to the Horses! Bicycling in Gilded-Age Denver" (*Colorado History*, 1991).

In May 1887 George Nellis, a newspaper writer and avid bicyclist, mounted his high-wheeled Columbia Expert and set out on a cross-country trip from New York to San Francisco. His goal was to cross the continent in record time, which he did. To pay for his adventure, Nellis wrote a stream of articles for his hometown paper and for national bicycling publications, describing the roads, scenery, hazards, and people he encountered. Kevin J. Hayes edited those reports into this entertaining and illuminating account of Nellis's odyssey.

Hayes's major objective, which he achieves well, is to present Nellis's record of his journey as an example of nineteenth-century travel literature. Hayes shows that Nellis tailored his reports for different audiences. For his hometown paper and its rural readers Nellis wrote in the style of the belletristic narrative, emphasizing the grand vistas, thrilling adventures, and characters he encountered. For his other major audience, urban bicycling enthusiasts, Nellis's reports detailed daily distances, times, road conditions, and, where he found them, local cycling clubs. Iowa readers will recognize scenes of Nellis's journey from Davenport to Council Bluffs, including a visit to the Amana settlements, scurrying for protection from a sudden "regular old Iowa tornado" (82), and a tour of Des Moines with members of the local bicycle club.

An American Cycling Odyssey succeeds as an example of nineteenth-century travel literature, but as a historical document it raises questions that readers may wish Hayes had contemplated more deeply since bicycling represented ambiguities and tensions in late nineteenth-century American culture. Nellis cherished both his small-town origins and the independence and mobility his bicycle gave him. Yet the bicycle itself, and the smooth macadamized roads Nellis preferred to muddy rural paths, represented a society in transition from rural agrarian to urban industrial. Nellis's visit to Chicago is illustrative.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.